



***THEIR MONEY OUR WAY:
INFLUENCING HIGHLY CAPABLE
ALLIES AND PARTNERS***

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“Allies and partners”—multiple US strategy documents contain these three words, and senior leaders reinforce the need for their contributions at every opportunity. The US Department of Defense largely builds relationships and capabilities with allies and partners through security cooperation.

A paradigm shift is long-overdue, however. At present, significant resources and detailed processes focus on engagement with developing countries, defined by [lower income levels](#). Countries with high-income levels are assumed to be self-sufficient capability-wise and given less attention. While helping countries in need might seem logical at first, it overlooks our most capable allies and partners in the acquisition of advanced weapons systems critical in a coalition war fight. Left unchecked, a significant acquisition today may be of little coalition value in the future, increasing US burden-sharing commitment. Herein lies the problem explained through a story of two camps.

Type 1: Building-partner-capacity camp

This is the predominant camp within the security cooperation enterprise. [Building partner capacity](#) programs encompass security cooperation and security assistance activities funded by US government appropriations. The primary authorization for the US Department of Defense is Title 10 US Code Section 333. The fiscal year 2021 funding amount inclusive of smaller capacity building authorizations was [approximately \\$1 billion](#). This camp’s members enjoy control over initiative implementation since US government appropriations fund the activities. This drives proactiveness. Countries that desire capability development in areas such as border security or counterterrorism—mainly developing countries like the Philippines or Vietnam—frequently benefit from this authority.

The US Department of Defense takes extraordinary measures to ensure the success of its building-partner-capacity efforts, given the funds are taxpayer dollars. Initiatives must demonstrate that the country cannot achieve the desired capability absent US assistance. [Department of Defense Instruction 5132.14](#), Assessment, Monitoring, and Evaluation for the Security Cooperation Enterprise establishes the framework for building-partner-capacity programs. Planners spend significant time anticipating partner requirements, developing initiatives, and carefully applying over a multi-year time horizon. Teams of US government contractors work to evaluate progress toward campaign plan objectives. This camp has a large following and many organizational battle rhythms incorporate its planning milestones.

Type 2: Capacity-built partner camp

This is the less popular, independent, and sometimes neglected camp. Highly capable countries generally possess formidable military capabilities given high-income status, self-funding force development, and arms acquisitions. Plainly, they are thought of as capacity-built, requiring little US attention specific to their capability development efforts. Although major US arms transfers to highly capable countries have congressional notification criteria through the foreign military sales process—the US government’s program for [transferring defense articles](#)—these are intended as checks allowing congressional objection

to the sale, if warranted. Camp members operate reactively, believing that if a country is using sovereign funds, the United States cannot dictate use. Their resulting modus operandi is to receive the purchase request, ensure it meets administrative standards, and action it through a series of procedural and legislative requirements before delivering the capability. Sometimes neglect turns to attention for this camp when a country announces the purchase of the latest fifth-generation aircraft worth billions. However, this attention is fleeting, as once the purchase contract is signed, members revert to transaction mode postured for the next sale. Highly capable countries frequently engaged in foreign military sales transactions with the United States are Australia, Japan, or South Korea.

Although reactive and neglected, camp members administered a foreign military sales portfolio valued at approximately [\\$28 billion in Fiscal Year 2021](#)—nearly 28 times the dollar value handled by building-partner-capacity camp members. With such a sizeable sum alongside the most advanced weapons systems, it is counterintuitive that most of the attention and emphasis resides with the building-partner-capacity camp. While multiple regulations guide how international arms transfers should be processed and exported, no document exists that outlines how the US Department of Defense should influence acquisitions of US-origin equipment by highly capable countries.

The problem with camp politics

The urgency to develop a required capability with a country does not power the building-partner-capacity camp. It is foremost a matter of the fiscal responsibility of US government funds and whether a partner's return on investment is worthwhile. Despite widespread support and emphasis, countries benefitting from building-partner-capacity programs generally do not possess fifth generation fighters, ballistic missile defense systems, or precision munitions effective against the US pacing threat. If so, they would be considered capacity-built. The lack of consideration within the security cooperation enterprise to influence acquisitions of a highly capable ally or partner is equivalent to waiting to be told what to do.

While pundits may argue that foreign national acquisition decisions are sovereign, foreign military sales are a way to achieve US ends with a partner. Proactivity, to achieve an end is necessary, regardless of the funding source. Building-partner-capacity camp members could have an easier job. Rarely would a partner dismiss no-cost training and equipment provided by the US government; little convincing is needed. However, for members of the capacity-built partner camp, influencing a major acquisition decision toward the foremost interest of a collective coalition requirement, not a country's unilateral desires, is incredibly challenging.

Operationalizing capability development

A method to influence ally and partner capability development is to operationalize it. Operationalizing within US military decision-making and joint planning processes elevates it to commander's business, gaining the level of visibility and attention necessary. It also projects future capabilities to inform and perhaps one day be incorporated into US campaign and contingency planning.

Operationalizing capability development would flow as follows. First, understand and agree on the most prevalent threat bilaterally; in some regions, this is clear. Second, understand the enemy force structure and likely courses of action. Third, based on enemy capabilities, examine the partner's current capabilities; this will require comparing the performance characteristics of weapons systems to determine strengths and weaknesses between the two forces to identify partner capability gaps. Finally, identify the capabilities needed to address the gap.

In some cases, capability gaps can be further scoped to a particular weapon system depending on the scenario. In other cases, a significant acquisition desire by a partner may require discouragement, especially if marginally effective against a threat and risks tying up defense budgets for multiple years. The resulting capabilities and supporting weapons systems become critical enablers to integrated deterrence.

Operationalizing ally and partner capability development in the context of the Ukraine conflict provides good insights. When Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, the regional threat was clear. Reports also indicated that Russian tactics used in Georgia were [strikingly similar](#) to those used in Ukraine today. Additional lessons were learned during the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The United States thus had 14 years to identify required defense capabilities bilaterally and influence Ukraine to acquire them through foreign military sales in the required quantities. The weapons systems the US government [rapidly transferred to Ukraine](#) early in 2022 are not the latest modern arms, minus some tactical drones. Stingers began fielding to the US military in 1978, Javelins in 1996, and M777 Howitzers in 2005. Significantly, the US Army was on a path to [retiring Stingers](#). Although some of these weapons were initially [purchased by Ukraine](#) using their national funds, they fell short, given the overwhelming quantities eventually provided by the US government.

A need for evolution

Influencing the capability development and acquisition decisions of highly capable allies and partners is long overdue. In a future where multinational operations and burden sharing will be the norm, the United States cannot do it alone. Washington must pay close attention to, and influence where possible, foreign capability strategies and acquisition roadmaps. Emphasizing allies and partners, particularly the highly capable ones, does little good if the United States has no strategy to shape capability contributions before there is a crisis. Operationalizing ally and partner capability development is the first step in developing such a strategy. Doing so provides the evolutionary leap necessary for the security cooperation enterprise.

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